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ABSTRACT

The Learning Center, established one year ago to serve the Special Entry Students at U.C.L.A., is described. The development of a staff capable of responding to the particular needs of this population is briefly discussed and the resulting teamwork informally evaluated. In learning how to assist these students to survive in their new university environment, six hypotheses were stated and used as take-off points for the development of an effective program: (1) traditional instruction had not worked; (2) there were large gaps in skill areas; (3) there would be extremely divergent perceptions of the university; (4) hostility and/or apathy could be anticipated; (5) long term goal orientation would generally be lacking; and (6) the intellectual potential of the students would be equal to that of regularly enrolled students. Within this set of hypotheses, a wide repertoire of approaches to learning basic skills emerged. One such approach to language as a communication process is explained. No formal evaluation has yet been attempted, but the authors feel that the environment, the personalized teaching "techniques," and their general way of regarding individuals have made a difference. (TI)

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A UNIVERSITY LEARNING CENTER

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The Learning Center is one of the several resource centers which compose the Student Counseling Services at UCLA. It represents one attempt at recognizing the wide variations between students as to primary concerns, life styles, and values. As part of the Student Services, we are a non-academic department. There is no fee, no records kept, and neither grades nor credit given for the work done at the Center. Attendance is entirely voluntary. Students are referred to us by their instructors, academic advisers, counselors or friends; some remember having heard about us during orientation; some "happen" upon us. In the total absence of external controls, the only "hold" we have on our students is their own desire for self-improvement and a shared faith that it can and will happen.

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The Learning Center was established approximately one year ago to serve a specific population, one new and unique to the University community, the Special Entry Students. The first of these groups was the High Potential Program, consisting of four components: Black, Chicano, Indian and Asian. Students were selected for this special education program on the basis of their anticipated potential, rather than on previously demonstrated academic performance. Because most of these students had experienced failure in traditional school settings and because new approaches to learning were being sought, we were invited to lend support to the challenge of this new program. At the present time we are available to anyone in the University community who is interested in increasing or refining his basic skills, and through this process to begin to experience excitement in learning and growing. This has included such groups as Educational Opportunity Program students, staff, and foreign students.

The development of a staff capable of responding to the particular needs of this population has been an exciting process. Currently the staff consists of five part-time counselors and one intern-trainee. Four of the staff members have had previous experience in working in the Reading and Study Center with regularly enrolled UCLA students prior to the opening of the Learning Center. More importantly, the staff possesses a wide variety of academic backgrounds, life-styles, ages and experiences. However, we all share certain desires and beliefs. First, a desire to accept the challenges of our changing world. Second, a belief that a student will learn more if he has the help of an interested person who honestly believes that the student can learn. Third, a desire to respond to whatever concerns the

student brings, and to help him change to survive in the University environment.

The location and physical surroundings of the Center have been a happy accident. Located in an attic, which serves as a bridge between the old wing and the new wing of the administration building, we are half way between the Student Counseling Center and the Financial Aids Offices, and therefore, in a heavily trafficked area. Our two small rooms, with slanted ceilings, dormer windows, informal furnishings, and bright accents, look more like someone's "pad" than a University office. Often a student will stop at our door to comment on our "looks", stay to find out who we are, and accept our invitation to return when he has more time.

Because of the "fish bowl" quality of our existence, the staff has learned to operate as a team. We have developed a mutual respect for and trust in each other, a comfortable acceptance of participation in all tasks and functions, and a remarkable openness in our relationships. How it all happened, and we are really not sure how, the results have been very exciting for us. We have an open door, weekdays, from nine to five. We give directions to people looking for other offices; we always take the time to answer questions about the Center or whatever; we welcome students who just want to browse; and of course, we have a counselor immediately available for the student who is ready to begin to work. Because we work in the open, and because of the diversity represented in the staff, every student has a wider range of resources, models, and ideas from which to choose. In some cases students choose to work together, with or without a counselor. Working this way

makes it essential that the staff engage in continuing dialogue regarding each student's progress. This has helped to insure general agreement about and continuity to his program. While these discussions have facilitated considerable staff growth, we have made an effort to not lose sight of our main purpose - to assist each student in his effort to become an independent learner.

We feel that as a result of this kind of teamwork most students have a unique and positive experience in the Learning Center. For the student who is not ready for the team approach we can and do make provisions for privacy. A simple nod, gesture, or occasional request for privacy is immediately noticed and the rest of the team moves off. We must add that we have a lot of fun, too. The struggle to master basic skills can become very intense work, but we've discovered that humor plays an important part in learning. In the final analysis, we have learned that we have to do whatever is necessary to facilitate learning - we don't make people learn - we try to free them to learn.

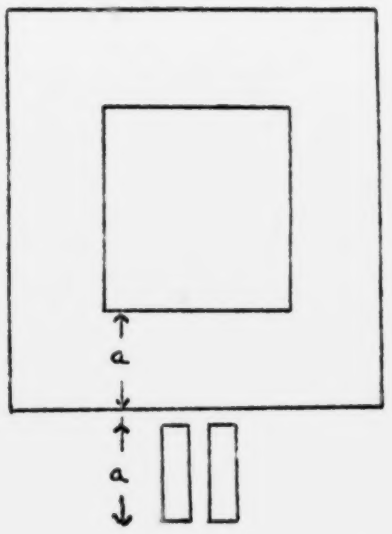
As we mentioned earlier, we do not keep records. We are not concerned with compiling statistics; all that we can say is that we worked with approximately 250 individuals during the last quarter. We kept no record of the number of contacts or hours spent with each individual.

We are concerned with helping each person to survive as a human being, and for that human being to survive in the University. How could we best accomplish this? Our earlier failures in attempting to work with Special Entry students in a traditional university setting taught us that some different ways were necessary to meet these needs.

HOW TO FIND THEM?

The problem we encountered is illustrated in Joseph Church's (1) Moat Problem.

> "...a square moat, the same width on all four sides. For purposes of the problem, the moat is infinitely deep. The task is to make a usable bridge across the moat. The only materials are two boards, each just shorter than the width of the moat. Once this problem has been solved, the moat will never look the same again."



The Moat Problem represents a rough analogy to our dilemna and the situation of our students as we faced the task before us. As long as we continued to ask the same old questions in the same old way, we could not help people to cross the moat and capture the castle!

Although we had among us many years of experience counseling regular University students, we knew that we really did not know or could not choose a priori techniques or methods that would help our students to survive in their new environment. So we began with the idea that I. A. Richards (2) calls "feedforward". Based on certain hypotheses we

planned programs. The feedback resulting from the activation of these plans was used to evaluate and alter the activities. Our original hypotheses were as follows:

1. The traditional methods of instruction had not worked for the Special Entry Students. Was it because their actual life experiences and circumstances had been so different and/or difficult?
2. There would be large lacunae in skill areas, and there would not be a large reservoir of traditionally shared experience on which to draw. Could we make any of the usual assumptions about performance level or previous learning?
3. The absence of these shared experiences would probably alter their perceptions of the University. Had they had any opportunities to gather the kind of information from parents, older siblings, or friends that leads to an operational and attitudinal know-how of college life? Did they know how to use resources, such as books, libraries, service people? Did the differences in culture, language, and values with which they came make it overwhelmingly difficult to learn or accept the University culture? Did they see college simply as an extension of the High School experience?
4. Based on hypotheses 2 and 3 we might expect to meet attitudes of hostility, apathy, or both.
5. Long term goal orientation would be lacking for most.
6. We fully anticipated that the intellectual potential of these students would be equal to that of the regularly enrolled University students.

As we proceeded to "feedforward", our earliest "feedback" helped us to learn very quickly what our limitations should be. For a variety of

cogent reasons we learned that we should not be dealing with Ethnic Studies, nor should our focus be on course content. Moreover, we could not allow our Center to become a tutorial service as "tutoring" is usually understood by students.

What we could do most effectively was to focus on the learning processes supported by basic skills, while dealing with any personal counseling that arose within that context.

There were two essential "sets" that began to emerge. Set A - We had to involve the student in the discovery of his own needs and the setting of his own goals. We had to facilitate his involvement and interest in his own learning. We had to be especially aware and sensitive to avoid diminishing the person as an individual, while helping him to use frustration constructively. Set B - We had to help each individual to build a bridge from where he was to the reality of the University. Most of our students were "strangers in a strange land." We had to help them write the guide book to this foreign country, its customs and its language, its responsibilities as well as its privileges. Likewise, most of our students were strangers to their own learning-reasoning processes. They needed to be made aware of what it was that they were doing when learning took place, and where they got off the track when it didn't happen for them. And, because we are always working under extreme time pressure generated both by the quarter system and the uncertainty as to the number of hours we would see any particular student, it soon became apparent that we had to carry on all these processes simultaneously.

We discovered that it was possible to accomplish our goals by developing a wide repertoire of approaches to any particular skill area. Fortunately, we had some back-log of experiences, but we have had to engage in a continual search both for new materials and new approaches. The counselors' diverse educational backgrounds have provided a large pool of resources. The particular skill areas in which we have been engaged are: reading, writing, speaking, listening, spelling, vocabulary, all aspects of study skills, and basic problem solving techniques. We have worked out developmental sequences of experience in all of these areas. A student may begin at any point in the sequence according to his needs, and may shift direction at any time that it seems appropriate to do so. These decisions are always made jointly by the counselor and the student.

We have given a great deal of thought to creating unusual approaches to learning basic skills. The following is one example:

Language - a symbolic process

Many of the students we see have good oral skills, but they make no connection between their speaking and listening skills and their reading and writing skills. We were concerned with making the students aware of the interconnection between the oral and written forms of symbol usage. One specific goal was to involve students in experiences which would demonstrate these connections.

We started with the discussion of familiar non-verbal symbols: gestures, colors, uniforms, signal systems, etc. We struggled to understand how these non-verbal symbols were used to symbolize meaning. Next, we presented pictures (3). We asked the students what the picture "said" and to point to the details that helped them "read" the picture's

message. Next, the students were given a highly descriptive passage to read and then asked to draw what they "saw", with as many of the details as possible. We were not interested in the quality of the art work - stick figures were fine. We have found that this sequence does help students to build confidence in their ability to handle symbols, and they are then more willing to tackle the whole area of language as a communication process.

We have in the past and are now in the process of developing other new approaches in the areas of spelling, speaking, writing and listening.

We use ourselves as models to teach the learning processes of acquistion, transformation and evaluation as we attack whatever presenting need or problem the student brings. We walk with the individual through the problem, continually feeding back to him what it is that we are doing and thinking - and the why. At the same time we engage the student in dialogue about what he is thinking and feeling - and the why. When we reach an impasse we make this obvious to the student, and we also make it apparent how we ourselves need to turn to resources - books, dictionaries, other people - in search for solutions.

Clearly the nature of our students, the wide range of needs, and our manner of working taught us that we needed to work with individuals or in the smallest possible cluster groupings. We also came to know that there had to be an immediate and transferable reward for every student each time we worked with him. He had to be able to take away something that was of immediate use in his course work.

As we come to the end of our first year, how do we evaluate our

work? So far we have made no effort to isolate the specific effect of the Center from the effect of the Special Entry Program with which the student is associated. We have attempted to encourage the student to evaluate his progress in relation to the goals he has established for himself. Has there been a change in his behavior, skills, or attitudes with which he is satisfied? Has he tested these changes in the real world of the University/classroom? Is he satisfied for the present? Has he set new goals for himself? Does he want to continue working now - or return at another time? The choice is his.

When we try to evaluate what makes learning occur we are filled with a sense of awe at the complexity of the learning process and the extent to which it is not understood. We wish we could specify what makes the difference. We feel that our environment, our ways of involving people in the work they do, our emphasis on being credible, have contributed to the success we have had. But, beyond all this there is some kind of "magic" that happens for some students and not for others. When it happens we back-track with the student trying to locate the moment or situation that seemed to be the touchstone. What has emerged from these dialogues is that there is no particular technique, method, material or sequence of work to which the transformation can be attributed. The phenomenon occurs at a point where something the individual experiences generates in him a strong sense of potency, strong enough to transfer to other areas of his life. There also seems to be emerging evidence that trust and faith need to be present, but most significant of all is the freedom to struggle: The moth must struggle from the cocoon with his own power if he is ever to fly. Perhaps our most important role is not to prevent this kind of struggle, but to make it more effective.

References

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3. Steichen, Edward. The Family of Man. The Museum of Modern Art. 1955.